



Speech

Discours

Notes for an address by
The Honorable Tom McMillan, P.C., M.P.
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Canada

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(Aussi disponible en français)

Canada



The amendments that Canada and the U.S. will sign tomorrow are designed to keep the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement current and, it is to be hoped, even ahead of its time. They are the result of an intensive eight-month review. The two national governments, provincial and state administrations, and the public at large were involved. Great Lakes United, among other environmental groups on both sides of the border, made a vital contribution to this work.

All participants agreed that the 1978 agreement was a solid one. The 1987 admendments will strengthen the agreement and, in particular, provide new mechanisms to deal with current and emerging problems alike. Specific improvements will seek to control airborne chemicals, to deal with contaminated sediments, to designate and remedy particular areas of concern, to reduce pollution from non-points sources like chemical dumps and farm and city runoff, to protect groundwater and to develop water quality objectives for each of the Great Lakes.

As important as anything else, the amendments set new deadlines for reducing pollution.

The amendments demonstrate what can be accomplished when committed people work together on a common cause. Such co-operation is needed now as never before. Just as today's environmental problems do not lend themselves to simple solutions, so also do they elude efforts to compartmentalize

them. Nature is a seamless web. The more science teaches us that fact the more we realize how much we have to take it into account in seeking solutions to environmental problems. Because the problems themselves don't fall into neat divisions, neither can the solutions or the structures needed to implement them.

Yet government continues to be wedded to the old ways. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of human health and the environment. There can be no question that a contaminated environment threatens human health. You are what you eat, but also what you drink and breathe.

It may not always be certain what the health effects are. Nor may it be clear when one pollutant versus another is causing the problem. Perhaps both are doing so either alone or in synergy. Clearly, in many cases, more needs to be known in this complex area.

But government cannot wait until science provides irrefutable proof. It must act on the basis of what certitude there is. And no one department of government has a monopoly on either the expertise or jurisdiction in this area. When is a problem essentially an environmental one and when is it primarily a matter of human health? Surely, the line is not nearly as easily drawn in the real world as it is in the bureaucracy of government.

In Canada, the Departments of Environment and Health were organized at a time when the two policy areas were seen to be much more discrete than we now know them to be. Although the departments are making real efforts to cooperate in areas of common concern, ~~artificial barriers~~ preclude the kind of genuinely interdisciplinary approaches that the problems in the real world demand.

The problem is compounded by jurisdictional divisions between the federal and provincial governments. In Canada -- and, I think, in the U.S. as well -- the public itself couldn't care less which government or which department is responsible. It wants action. The media, understandably, share and express the public's frustration. Even under the best of circumstances, government might not be able to meet such demands as fully or as quickly as it is pressured to do. But existing arrangements work against success.

Changing traditional mind-sets and bureaucratic structures that reflect them is a daunting challenge. I have no magic blueprint. And I suspect no-one else does, either. Clearly, though, in an era when pollutants are all pervasive, and when their effects are as harmful as they are insidious, only a holistic approach can even begin to solve the problem.

Such an approach must be taken both within governments and between them, including between governments of different nations altogether.

Rene Dubos' Fourth Rule of Ecology is "everything is connected to everything else." It is more than an environmental precept: it is a profoundly moral statement that implies each jurisdiction has obligations to every other one.

In the case of Canada and the United States, the connections include 400 common waterways along the much-touted longest undefended border in the world. Both countries are proud of their independence. For our part, we Canadians have had to zealously guard our sovereignty because we are a small population along side a populous and economically powerful neighbour. Providence and Nature, however, have placed us in the same environmental harness. So, it is not just desirable but also essential that we co-operate to ensure that our shared environment is protected. That does not mean adopting the same environmental laws in the two countries, any more than it means adopting the same parliamentary or legal systems. Environmental laws on opposite sides of our common border reflect distinct historic and political differences between us, and those laws respond to conditions unique to each country.

In areas of mutual concern, Canadians and Americans need to ensure that their environmental laws are made strong enough and